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SOURCES FOR THE FIRST CENTURY OF ISLAM[*]

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It may be surprising that there is so much to say about a period that is supposed to be poor in sources. The impression of a lack of primary and reliable secondary sources for the first century of Islam has been created by the issue of the usability of Arabic literary materials that are admittedly secondary. Indeed, the authenticity of the entire Arabic literary corpus, when it deals with matters in the first century and one-half of Islam, has been undermined by the skepticism of Western scholars based on its internal contradictions, on the partisan biases of the transmitters, on the anachronous projections of later issues and legal theories back to an earlier period, on the fictional and legendary quality of its anecdotal elements, and on assumptions about the nature of oral composition and transmission. Such criticism has led to a rather late dating of the use of writing for literature and of the use of the *isnād* especially associated with the Schacht thesis,[1] as well as to views that saw Islamic historical composition originating in commentaries on the Qur'ān and poetry.

In contrast to this tradition of hypercritical skepticism, the revisionist historiography of recent decades reflects an increasing tendency to take these sources more seriously. This tendency is based partly on internal evidence for the early use of written texts. The arguments of Nabia Abbott,[2] Claude Cahen,[3] A.A. Duri,[4] Ursula Sezgin,[5] and others have tended to restore confidence in the usability of the Arabic literary sources, and have pushed back the beginning of historical composition to the eighth or ninth decades of the first century of the Hijra.

The rehabilitation of these sources, however, has argued only for their authenticity. For two reasons, even authentic material may not necessarily be reliable. In the first place, even the original accounts of eyewitnesses possess a subjective partisan quality presenting a point of view intended to justify or to condemn. In the second place, authentic early accounts have been transmitted selectively, sometimes in a way that reflects the biases of the transmitter. The accounts that survive are not complete, since a great deal of the literary production of the second century has disappeared. [In fact, the problems of interpreting early Islamic history have less to do with the lack of authentic information than with its partisan nature.]

But the subjective quality of these materials can actually become an advantage for a sensitive and perceptive researcher because multiple versions of an event can be used to identify attitudes, gauge feelings, and chart the development of issues in a way that is

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impossible with truly objective sources. These materials will yield to sophisticated techniques such as *isnād* criticism, in order to identify the time and place an account was circulated and to relate its content to contemporary issues, as M. Muranye[6] and E.L. Petersen[7] have shown. The very size of the literary corpus makes extensive collation possible, in order to identify biases in different accounts of the same event and to discover the basic facts on which they all agree, as M. Hinds[8] and W. Schmucker[9] have done.

Such methods open up a huge body of literature that may be used for the first century. It is possible to deal with all of the old questions more effectively; more importantly, new questions asked of even the standard Arabic literary sources will yield important information on social and economic history, psychohistory, and historical anthropology. Chronicles, *adab*, legal literature, and especially biography and *ansāb* such as the works of Ibn Sa^{c}d and al-Balādhurī (whose *Ansāb al-Ashrāf* is one of the most important and least used of the major Arabic sources) can be systematically exploited.

The rehabilitation of literary sources does not excuse us from identifying and using primary sources. There are contemporary, first-century written sources in Arabic in the form of inscriptions on buildings,[10] tombstones,[11] coins,[12] seals and weights[13] that contain doctrinal, chronological, administrative,[14] paleographic[15] and onomastic information. The largest single body of contemporary Arabic texts, however, consists of papyri letters, receipts, contracts and petitions,[16] which contain invaluable administrative and economic information.[17] While the evidence from papyri relates to provincial conditions in Egypt, it often presupposes developments in the eastern provinces related in the literary sources. Apart from the information contained in these documents, their language and orthography provide important dated evidence for the history of the Arabic language and its script.

Although much information can be derived from all of these materials, it deals primarily with issues facing the Arab/Muslim ruling minority and contributes to a form of history that is basically elitist. While we are often told that the nature of pre-modern literate culture makes this inevitable, it is possible to avoid this limitation partly by using non-Muslim and largely non-Arabic sources written in Greek,[18] Pahlavi, Armenian, Coptic, Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac,[19] Mandaic and Chinese. Some of these materials are peripheral, either because they originate outside the region—the Chinese[20] or Byzantine Greek sources—or because they are later literary sources such as the Byzantine chronicle of Theophanes;[21] the Syriac chronicles of Elias of Nasibin,[22] Pseudo-Dionysius,[23] Michael the Syrian,[24] Bar Hebraeus;[25] the monastic history of Thomas of Marghā;[26] the Christian Arabic chronicles of Se^{c}erd,[27] Agapius of Manbij[28] and Severus b. al-Muqaffa^{c};[29] the chronicle *Liber Turris*;[30] the Jewish Arabic account of sects by al-Qirqisāni;[31] the Hebrew *Letter* of Sherira Gaon;[32] and the symbolic chronicle of Ibn Daud.[33] These sources provide additional information about external political, military and economic conditions, or about issues within their own communities, but, of course, present the same problems of partisanship and anachronism as Muslim/Arabic literature.

There are other contemporary works and documents produced by

the native majority population, which alone make it possible to go beyond matters affecting the Arab/Muslim rulers. First-century chronicles such as those of Sebeos in Armenian,[34] the Khuzistan chronicle[35] and the history of Bar Penkayē in Syriac,[36] and of John of Nikiu in Coptic[37] contain a scattering of precious details regarding political history (J.B. Segal was too discouraging about the usefulness of Syriac chronicles in general).[38] Their major importance lies in the vantage point they provide: an outlook on events that reveals the reactions of the native populations and their internal problems. They also provide incidental information for social and economic history, as demonstrated by Claude Cahen in a famous article that is often cited but seldom imitated.[39]

Biography—essentially the lives of Christian saints in Greek[40] or Coptic—and especially the Syriac biographies of the Monophysite bishops Aḥūdemmeh and Marūta,[41] of Rabban Hurmizd,[42] of St. Maximos the Confessor,[43] as well as the lives of seventh and eighth-century saints by Īshōᶜdena of Baṣra,[44] is an even more important source for social history, as well as religious life and comparative literature.[45] These themes are reflected in Muslim *sīra* and *tabaqāt* works.[46]

There are Greek, Coptic and Syriac sermons and letters such as the sermons of Sophronios,[47] the letters of Ishōᶜyahbh III,[48] or the letters of George, Bishop of the Arabs[49] that identify contemporary issues, allude to events, register reactions and feelings, and provide contemporary examples of these compositional genres. The importance of Greek administrative papyri for early Muslim Egypt has been shown by Bell.[50] Works on piety, such as those of St. Maximos the Confessor,[51] of Isaac of Nineveh,[52] and of Joseph Ḥazzāya,[53] are important for the history of asceticism and mysticism, while an apocalyptic work such as that of Pseudo-Methodios,[54] in its Syriac and Greek versions, provides insight to the contemporary mood and expectations, and deserves to be compared with eschatological *ḥadīth*.[55] Magical texts in Mandaic, Talmudic Aramaic and Syriac contain precious information on the state of contemporary paganism, popular Gnosticism, and religious syncretism; and because of their ties to the *Ginza*, they provide important background on the formation of the Mandaean sect and the emergence of *ghulāt* Shīᶜism.[56] Magical texts are also useful sources for social history because they contain information about family relationships and size, naming patterns, and the use of matronymics among a population that is otherwise almost unknown.

Lastly, there are important legal sources for the first century such as the Syriac canons of the synod of George I held in 676,[57] the legal correspondence of Hᵉnanīshōᶜ I (686-693),[58] and Coptic law.[59] The earliest of the geonic responses also belong to this period.[60] These materials provide important evidence for the internal organization of the subject population, and for comparative law and society; and occasionally they touch on relations with the rulers.

Generally speaking, non-Muslim sources such as these have mostly been used for church history and the history of Judaism, and remain *terra incognita* to many who believe themselves concerned with *Islamic* history. The communal orientation of these materials in

itself reflects a major contemporary trend; but they all contain information useful for social, economic and intellectual history, and must all be consulted if we are to understand the period as a whole and not just one of the ruling or subject communities within it. It should also be pointed out that most of these materials are fairly accessible. Published texts usually have been translated into some Western language and may be tracked down in the volumes of the *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, *Patrologia Orientalis*, *Woodbrooke Studies*, *Patrologia Graeca*, and *Analecta Bollandiana*, where their content at least is available to specialists in Islamic history.

Rich and varied as the written sources are, however, they do not exhaust the materials available for the first century. There are several categories of objects, apart from the inscriptions on them, that belong to this period. The cluster of monuments surviving from the Marwānī Period—such as the Umayyad mosque in Damascus,[61] the Dome of the Rock,[62] Ukhaidhir,[63] Quṣayr ʿAmra, Hirbet al-Baida,[64] ʿAnjar,[65] and Mshattā[66]—is the largest number for several centuries, and has received a great deal of scholarly attention. These monuments provide important information for architecture,[67] decorative art,[68] artistic symbolism[69] and cultural history,[70] as well as having implications for economic history.[71]

While there is much more that archaeology could provide, the excavations that have been carried out—such as those at Qasr al-Ḥayr al-Gharbī and Sharqī,[72] Khirbat al-Mafjar,[73] Khirbat al-Minya,[74] Ḥira,[75] Ctesiphon,[76] Kūfa,[77] and Sīrāf[78]—have contributed to our knowledge of architecture, art, domestic life and material culture. The implications of the finds at Khirbat al-Mafjar for architecture and art have been presented by Hamilton,[79] as those of the finds at Qasr al-Ḥayr for art history were used by Schlumberger,[80] and those of the finds at Sīrāf for economic history by Whitehouse[81] and Williamson.[82] Ceramic and textile objects contributing to the history of technology, have implications for economic history, and help to date the contexts in which they are found.[83]

Archaeology can also provide information about site occupation that has implications for demographic and ecological changes either through single-site studies—such as those of Frierman at Tell el-Burj[84] and Adams at Tell Abū Sarīfa[85]—or regional surveys such as those of Adams in the Diyala plains[86] and the Uruk countryside,[87] Gibson in the central Sawād,[88] or Whitcomb in ʿUmān.[89] The work of Baramki at Tell Ḥassān and of Meyers at Khirbet Shemaʿ have implications for religious changes as well.[90] Coins, seals and weights as objects also yield information on metallic content and ratios,[91] debasement, metrology and standardization applicable to economic history;[92] excavation coins and hoards provide suggestions about circulation;[93] and the images on coins serve as evidence for official symbolism and art history.[94]

Unfortunately, archaeological information is difficult to collect because much that has been done remains unpublished, or is published very slowly and in obscure places, and because the Islamic level at sites of greater antiquity usually receives less attention. Published data relating to the early Islamic period must be sought

in an array of journals such as *Annales archéologiques arabes de Syrie, Antiquity, Ars Islamica, Ars Orientalis, Art Islamique, Bulletin de l'Institut français d'Archéologie oriental du Caire, Bulletin de la Société d'Archéologie copte, Iranica Antiqua,* the *Israel Exploration Journal, Les Annales archéologiques d'Syrie, Mesopotamia Quarterly of the Department of Antiquities in Palestine; Sumer.*

It is worth noting that objects are almost always understood against the background of the literary tradition to which an appeal is usually made to provide anecdotal illustrations for the use of an object, to identify a patron, or to find a theory for the symbolism. It is almost a matter of predisposition whether the data from objects and non-Muslim literature become sources of confirmation and/or conflict with traditional interpretations of early Islamic history. In any case, the use of objects and non-Muslim sources should not be viewed as a methodological end-run around the problems in the Arabic literary sources, as there has been a recent attempt to do. What we really need to do is to interrelate the information from as many different kinds of sources as possible.

The major disadvantage to such an approach lies in the sheer volume and the linguistic and disciplinary diversity of the materials written in over half a dozen Middle Eastern languages, which require familiarity with the techniques of epigraphy, paleography, papyrology, numismatics, archaeology, neutron activation analysis, and art history. As intimidating as this is, it is more than offset by two major advantages. First, we are able to approach many questions from the vantage of several different disciplines. Second, the data from different kinds of sources are often supplementary, filling in knowledge about different aspects of their life. As a result, it is possible to understand a great deal about the first century of Islam.

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